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ABSTRACT

Differences in the ways in which instruction is presented in United States and Chinese classrooms underscores the need for cross-cultural communication, particularly when a teacher from one culture is working in the other. Promoting cross-cultural communication in the classroom contributes to global efforts to achieve greater understanding among people from diverse cultural backgrounds. In working toward such a goal, a Chinese-educated teacher shares with her students in Freshman Composition the experience of being educated in China and explains the Chinese educational philosophy. Departing from the authoritarian Chinese model of teaching, she invites students to take a more active role in class and discuss education. Foreign students are invited to contribute to class input by making presentations about their cultures. The teacher assigns readings on culture-related topics by authors from different cultural backgrounds. Students are encouraged to ask each other questions about their backgrounds. The presentations, readings, and discussion generate good topics for student essays. At a time when interactions among people from different cultural backgrounds are increasing, the classroom promotion of cross-cultural communication is a significant step towards achieving greater understanding among peoples. (SG)

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A Chinese Teacher's Efforts to Promote
Cross-Cultural Communication

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As we live in a world in which different cultures are increasingly in contact, cross-cultural communication becomes vital in all aspects of life, including education. In this paper, I will share with you my efforts to promote cross-cultural communication and understanding in freshman composition classrooms. I will first discuss the importance of promoting cross-cultural understanding in the classroom and then present some of the activities I have used for this purpose.

Let me start by telling you about two incidents that I encountered in teaching freshman composition which made me aware of the significance of cross-cultural understanding in our classrooms.

Two years ago, when I went to Northern Arizona University (NAU) as a Ph.D. student, I was offered a teaching assistantship by the English Department. My duties were teaching two classes of English 101, Freshman Composition. When I was preparing my classes before the semester started, I pondered on what my role and students' roles should be in the classroom, as I believe that an understanding of roles of teachers and students is essential for designing successful classroom activities. Since I was educated in China, the Chinese educational philosophy and practice, defined by thoughts and views of learning of Confucius, influenced my

thinking. Through many years of education in China, I had developed the belief that the teacher is the source of knowledge and the teacher's job is to pass on experience and knowledge through lecturing; students, on the other hand, are recipients of knowledge. This understanding of the teacher's and students' roles was what I brought into my classrooms when I started teaching. Unfortunately, at that time, little did I know that in a different culture, teachers and students play roles different from those I had expected.

It was the first time that I had worked with American students. Without a understanding of teachers' roles in the American educational setting, I did what I thought a good teacher should do. I prepared lessons in careful detail and assumed an authoritative role in the classroom, giving lectures on writing. It did not take me long to realize that something was going wrong in the classroom; the students did not seem to be interested in what I was doing. When I was lecturing, they were doing other things; no one took notes, to my great dismay. I tried very hard to reflect on what I did in the classroom and to figure out what was wrong, only to conclude that I was a conscientious teacher, until one day I overheard two of my students talking about the class. "She talks too much in the class," one student said. "She never allows us to participate," the other added. At that moment, I suddenly realized what was wrong; there was a big gap between my expectations and those

of my students regarding the roles of the teacher and students. I expected students to be recipients of knowledge, yet students expected themselves to be participants in the learning process. I feel that the discrepancy in expectations arose at least partly because of the different roles that teachers and students play in the Chinese and American cultures.

The second incident occurred in the spring semester of 1991 when I was teaching two classes, one of which was a mixed group of 18 with a Chinese student, a Japanese student, a few American Indian students, and some mainstream students. My foreign students were very quiet in class. One day, I asked a question, and for the first time, the Chinese student volunteered to answer. Probably as he always did when he answered teachers' questions in China, he stood up from his chair, and stood straight with his hands at his sides to pay respect to the teacher. In a second, the burst of laughter of the class overwhelmed his voice. The students laughed as if the Chinese student had done something that was really funny. Not knowing what had happened, and being greatly embarrassed, the poor student flushed and turned to me for help. It was clear to me that this incident occurred due to a lack of understanding of classroom practices in different cultures. Obviously, the students who laughed thought that the Chinese student's behavior was somewhat incomprehensible and possibly "weird", without any knowledge that in China,

students are expected to stand up to pay respect to the teacher when answering a question. On the other hand, the Chinese student did what was expected in his native culture, without knowing that standing up to answer a question is unnecessary in the American educational setting.

These two incidents heightened my awareness of the necessity to promote cross-cultural communication in the classroom. To me, there are at least two reasons why more cross-cultural communication is needed in our classrooms. First, English is rapidly becoming an international language. It is the official language of a number of countries and is taught and spoken as a second language in many others. Millions of people speak English as a first or second language, yet since these speakers come from different cultural backgrounds, cultural differences may lead to misunderstanding in interactions among English speakers. Promoting cross-cultural communication in the classroom contributes to the more global efforts to achieve greater understanding among people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Second, U.S. campuses have become constructs of the world in which different cultures are increasingly in contact. For many reasons, American colleges and universities have attracted students from all over the world, with most of the foreign students coming from the non-Western countries. These foreign students have brought many cultures to U.S. campuses, yet without cross-cultural communication and a

understanding of cultural differences, students and teachers from different cultural backgrounds may not be able to interact successfully. Specifically, lack of communication and understanding between foreign students and American teachers, between foreign teachers and American students and among students may result in lack of success in educational endeavors.

Realizing its importance, I have made efforts to promote cross-cultural communication in my composition classrooms. I shared with students my experiences of being educated in China, and explained the Chinese educational philosophy in class. My students and I held discussions on education; these discussions enabled me to develop a better understanding of teacher and student roles in the American educational setting, and in turn, helped me teach more effectively. I gave up my authoritative role in class, encouraged students to provide more input, and used more student-centered activities such as group discussion, peer editing and student presentation. My classes benefited from these changes.

I have tried to make culture an important component of the curriculum and to make a point of inviting foreign students to contribute to class input. I was more successful in this regard during spring of 1991 when I was teaching a mixed group. During that semester, students were asked to do an oral presentation on a topic of their choice, and I

encouraged foreign students to do presentations on their cultures. As part of the reading requirements, I assigned essays and chapters on culture-related topics by authors from different cultural backgrounds. As part of the writing requirements, I asked students to respond to the presentations and the readings.

The Chinese student, the Japanese student and a few American Indian students chose to do their presentations on their cultures. The Chinese student did his presentation on the day of the traditional Chinese Spring Festival. He showed a video which covered the history of China, the cultural sites, art, gourmet cooking, tourist attractions, and Chinese people's lives. He then discussed the educational system in China, focusing on specifically the Civil Service Exam that was used for more than 1,000 years and the current University Entrance Exam. Students' eyes widened when they heard that in China, college applicants have to take a three-day College Entrance Exam including 6 subjects, that only a small percentage of all applicants are admitted to universities or colleges each year, and that some of the teaching methods are very different from those used in the U.S.

When the floor was open for discussion, students asked various questions. For some American students, it was the first time that they had direct contact with a person from China, so they were eager to ask questions about a

culture not very familiar or to verify what they had heard about China. The Chinese student provided answers to the questions and informed the American students of what he had heard about the U.S. The discussion opened up a dialogue among students. The exchange of information dispelled some myths about both cultures and helped students realize the falsity of various cultural stereotypes and the importance of cross-cultural communication. The discussion involved almost everyone. Most students wrote in their written responses that the presentation broadened their horizon.

For her presentation, the Japanese student showed two video-tapes, one on post-war Japan, and the other on current Japan. Her talk centered on the changes that had occurred in Japan since World War Two. She talked specifically about the impact Western influences had had on Japanese society and culture, informing the students of how young people in Japan today admire the Western culture and how the old generation had become concerned about the survival of the Japanese culture. Her presentation was followed by an interesting discussion of cultural preservation. Students raised and discussed questions such as: Do external influences really pose a threat to an indigenous culture? Can a culture be preserved? As some students indicated, the presentation and the discussion led them to ponder on questions they never thought about before.

For the presenter herself, the presentation was a major breakthrough. Before giving the presentation, she was unwilling to participate in class discussion because she did not have confidence in her ability to communicate in English. When her presentation was applauded by her peers and she realized how great a job she had done, she smiled, in pleasant surprise. The presentation gave her an opportunity to prove her ability in oral communication in English and greatly promoted her confidence.

The presentations given by the American Indian students are worth mentioning. Although American Indian students are not foreign students, there is no question that they come from a unique culture which is not familiar to all. The American Indian students gave two presentations. In the first presentation, two American Indian students showed a film and talked about the values and beliefs in their culture. They also addressed issues such as stereotypes of American Indian people, the fear of losing their culture and language, and their frustration of being caught in two cultures. In the second presentation, two other Indian students brought works of art to the classroom and discussed life and art of native Americans. Both presentations were very well received.

The readings were successful in informing students and generating discussion. We read, among other things, a chapter from Liu Zongren's book "Two years in the Melting

Pot" in which the author described his experience in the United States as an exchange student. Students found Zongren's chapter particularly intriguing. For one thing, the chapter provided a comparison of the Chinese and the American cultures and Zongren's reflections on American values and beliefs from a foreigner's perspective. Students found the differences between the two cultures in friendship, love, dressing, and family quite interesting. Many of them were stunned by the cultural stereotypes of Americans that Zongren mentioned, one of which was that only five percent of an American woman's body was covered. Zongren's chapter helped students develop an awareness of cultural differences but at the same time, conveyed the message that understanding among people from different cultural backgrounds can be achieved through cross-cultural communication.

The discussion on cultural differences was exciting. Students discussed why and how cultural stereotypes were developed and discussed how cultural differences should be dealt with. The discussion was the most lively and involving one we had in that semester. Most students agreed in their written responses to the reading that cultural differences should be accepted, respected and appreciated.

Students were asked to select their own topics for writing that semester. To my great delight, the presentations, readings, and discussions on culture generated some good topics which students explored in some depth in

thoughtful papers. Showing how people from different cultural backgrounds had contributed to the political and economic development in the United States, one student argued that people from diverse cultures should have the right to carry on their cultural heritages, because after all, their cultures are all parts of the American culture. One of the American Indian students made the point that one should not and cannot cut off the ties with one's culture, because culture is part of one's identity.

Concerned about problems foreign students in the United States may face due to differences between students' native cultures and the American culture, the Japanese student did a research paper entitled "The Problems of Foreign Students". According to her research, one of the biggest problems for foreign students in the U.S. is "alienation and cultural shock". She discussed three main reasons for the problems, two of which are "the passive attitudes and lack of knowledge of the U.S. culture as a problem of foreign students," and the "indifference of American students about foreign countries." These two reasons clearly indicate that cross-cultural communication and understanding may be the solutions to the problems foreign students face. She suggested that "American colleges and universities need to make more efforts to help foreign students adjust to American culture as well as academic life." She added that college and university professors can help students overcome cultural

shock in class by encouraging foreign students to work with American students. She said that these kinds of activities "not only help foreign students to join the class positively and to communicate with other American students but also help American students become aware of different cultures and narrow their prejudice or avoid misunderstanding on other nations." I fully agree with her when she concluded that foreign students "can greatly contribute to mutual understanding in the future" and that "American institutions can get academic and cultural stimulation through foreign students' existence."

I have realized that promoting cross-cultural communication and understanding in the composition classroom has many advantages. It provides an invaluable opportunity of culture learning for everyone involved, enabling American students to appreciate other cultures and allowing foreign students to learn about the American culture and American way of life. It is also a great opportunity for the teacher to learn about other cultures and about and from students. Pedagogically, promoting cross-cultural communication through presentations, discussions, and readings is very helpful. The presentations and discussions on culture-related topics can elicit extensive student participation in class and open a channel for communication facilitating interaction among students. Furthermore, readings and discussions of cultures can generate topics for

student writing.

The world is rapidly becoming a global village in which different cultures are in contact. There is little doubt that the future of our world depends on successful communication and cooperation among members of the global village. Because of this, promoting cross-cultural communication and understanding is vital. I believe at a time when interaction among people from different cultural backgrounds is becoming increasingly important, promoting cross-cultural communication in our classrooms is a significant step towards achieving greater understanding among peoples.